

BERTHA WEGMANN

SOGLIO, GRAUBÜNDEN CANTON, SWITZERLAND, 1847 – COPENHAGEN 1926

Unlike most women artists of her day, Bertha Wegmann was fortunate in having a father who supported her in her desire to train as a painter. In the Denmark of the 1860s, only men had access to the Academy of Fine Arts. So, as the family had its roots in Switzerland, it was natural that Bertha should be sent to Munich, one of the most important art centers of the day. In Germany she acquired the technique and use of colors in vogue there, and she developed her choice of subjects and contents. She thus painted a number of genre scenes and pictures of poor children in the mountains, entirely conforming to the ideals current at the time.

When Paris developed into the center for the most advanced artistic trends of the time, she went there in 1881 with the Swedish painter Jeanna Bauck (1840–1925). Inspired by contemporary French artists, she changed her manner of expression, making way for a gentler use of the brush and lighter coloring. This is seen both in her landscapes and the portraits she subsequently painted. She returned for prolonged visits to France throughout the 1880s.

In 1880 she was rewarded with a Mention honourable at the Paris Salon and in 1882 received a gold medal for a portrait of her sister. The following year this painting was awarded the exhibition medal at Charlottenborg, becoming the first woman to be given a seat in the Royal Danish Academy Assembly, and she was also represented in Statens Museum for Kunst. With this, Bertha Wegmann's success was established. She settled in Denmark and received so many commissions for portraits that it became her career. Throughout her life she exhibited regularly in the Charlottenborg spring exhibition. At the same time she participated in numerous major official exhibitions in Scandinavia and Europe as well as the world fairs in Paris 1889 and 1900 and Chicago in 1893; she also exhibited in the ground-breaking Women's Exhibition in Copenhagen in 1895. Her paintings are found in the Hirschsprung Collection and at the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle.

Bertha Wegmann played an active part in the struggle for women's rights, partly as a member between 1887 and 1907 of the governing body of the School of Drawing for Women. Like so many female artists of the time, she laid great store by her freedom to develop professionally, and she never married.

It was Bertha Wegmann's tragedy that she never gained the recognition in Denmark to which her ability entitled her. Despite her formal success, she was never accepted as one of the painters of the 1880s Breakthrough, while in the 1890s her naturalistic method was no longer relevant. Her art was seen as alien, as is indeed still the case today. If she had not chosen to move back to Denmark, she could doubtless have created an international career for herself as a painter.

E.F.

LITERATURE: Sigurd Müller, *Nyere dansk Malerkunst*, 1884; Lise Svanholm in Louise Robbert (ed.), *De drog til Paris*, Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm 1988, pp. 213–218; Elisabeth Fabritius in *Weilbach*, vol. 8, Copenhagen 1998; Lise Svanholm, *Bertha Wegmann på Øregaard*, Øregaard Museum, Copenhagen 1998.